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Editorial: Zero tolerance with zero sense

Ahmed Mohamed, 14, is exactly the kind of student we tell ourselves we seek to uplift in this country. He is an inventor and the type of student our collective push for STEM (science, technology, engineering and math) is meant to encourage.

But when he brought a clock he had constructed to show to one of his teachers at MacArthur High School in Irving, Texas, Monday, an unnamed educator alerted the authorities, thinking it was actually a bomb. Ahmed was swiftly arrested by several police officers and led away in handcuffs, all while wearing his now iconic NASA T-shirt.

Ahmed is just the latest victim of what has become known as zero-tolerance policies in schools. The thinking goes that every perceived threat of violence in schools, no matter how preposterous, is automatically treated as being 100 percent real, and the harshest penalties of expulsion, arrest and suspension are immediately implemented. There are no exceptions. The logic goes that while this may seem heavy-handed, a terrorist or school shooter only has to slip through once for a tragedy to occur.

While the impulse behind this is at least partially understandable, it has led to ridiculous cases like Ahmed's, where perfectly innocent behavior causes

overreaction. For example, consider the case of 7-year-old Josh Welch, who was suspended from Park Elementary School in Baltimore in March 2013 for biting his strawberry Pop Tart into a shape his teacher thought looked like a gun? Or, what about 9-year-old Patrick, a fourth-grader at PS 52 in Staten Island, New York, who was pulled out of class for having a weapon that turned out to be a LEGO figure holding a plastic 2-inch gun? The examples are seemingly endless.

According to the National Association of School Psychologists, non-white students are much more likely to receive the harshest zero-tolerance punishments, making for inconsistent enforcement. This ends up having a greater effect on future outcomes, including making future expulsions much more likely. This story of repeated offending is the fuel that drives the so-called school-to-prison pipeline.

Ahmed Mohamed says he's going to transfer school districts. Charges will not be filed, and he has been invited to share his clock with President Obama. But not everyone gets to be a cause célèbre. Sometimes you just get your future severely hampered over nothing.